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**A MOUNTAIN BICYCLING PERSPECTIVE  
ON USER GROUP CONFLICT**

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Outdoor Recreation:  
Promise And Peril in The New West

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Natural Resources Law Center  
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# **A Mountain Bicycling Perspective on User Group Conflict**

*by Martha Roskowski*

## **I. SUMMARY**

*"User group conflict is defined as 'goal interference attributed to another's behavior.' " -from 'Conflicts on Multiple Use Trails: Synthesis of the Literature and State of the Practice.'*

The appearance of mountain bikes in the early 80s brought new management challenges and created a new constituency for recreation on public lands. The growth in mountain biking is fueled, in part, by economic forces. As agencies learn to manage mountain bicycling, trail closures are less frequent, but user group conflicts persist. Understanding user group conflict as goal interference helps to develop strategies that mitigate the tensions between users. A variety of education programs, user involvement and various management options have proven successful in reducing user conflict.

## **II. THE STATE OF THE SPORT**

### **A. Mountain biking is popular.**

Mountain biking is currently in vogue. A red Klein hung in Jerry Seinfeld's television apartment. Ads in magazines selling watches, insurance and cars use mountain bikes to convey independence, a wild spirit, enduring youth.

In 1995, 9.4 million Americans went mountain biking. In the West they flock to city and county open space lands near their suburban homes. On weekends and vacations they make pilgrimages to ride on public lands near places like Moab, Crested Butte and Fruita. Others have left city living to resettle in these small towns with less crowded trails and more tranquil lifestyles. This exodus is enabled, in part, by the telecommunications revolution. Middle-class, educated

and primarily white, these visitors and new residents do not simply ride the trails, they bring a lifestyle of microbreweries, cappuccino bars, art galleries and supermarket shelves stocked with energy bars and organic lettuce.

**B. Economics factor into the growth of mountain bicycling.**

Ski areas are turning to mountain biking as a source of summer revenue. A recent count shows nearly a third of U.S. ski areas offer summer lift service and trail networks. As unfavorable economic conditions shrink the nation's railroad system, old rail beds are being refurbished as bicycle trails which in turn sprout bike shops, bed & breakfast operations, guided tours and restaurants.

The bicycle manufacturing industry also plays a role. The approximate retail value of the U.S. bicycle market in 1995 was \$5.2 billion. The industry uses images of speed and daring to sell more bikes. Although the boom in mountain bikes has leveled off, 10 million mountain bikes were sold in 1995. Of those, only 10 percent will be ridden on backcountry trails, but that is a million new bikes a year joining us on public lands.

**III. MOUNTAIN BIKERS AS ENVIRONMENTALISTS**

**A. Impacts of mountain bicycling are both positive and negative.**

The boom in recreation means more crowded trails and more impacts on the environment. The positive side of the trend toward recreation is new economic vitality for some communities and a growing constituency that values public lands.

**B. Orientation of mountain bicyclists is pro-environment.**

While the mechanized nature of bicycles has led some to label mountain bikers as 'anti-environment,' lumping them in with motorized users, a national study indicates that mountain biker leaders are environmentally oriented. Mountain bike

opinion leaders “are overwhelmingly biocentric ... believing that nature has intrinsic value exclusive of what it does for humans, that humans do not have the moral license to infringe on this right, and that many of our environmental problems are rooted in our societal tendency to dominate, control, and exploit nature. There was widespread support for the idea that there are indeed limits to growth and that a more sustainable form of society is needed” (Hollenhorst, Olson and Schuett, 1996, p. 11).

**C. Image of mountain bicycling appeals to younger users.**

Although the rebel image of mountain biking has created friction both on the trail and in the world of public relations, that message has drawn a younger audience out onto public lands and that young blood will be vital to future efforts to protect those important resources.

**IV. MANAGING TRAIL USE**

**A. Managing trail use presents challenges.**

Challenges of managing trail use fall into three general categories: Protecting natural resources, maintaining user safety and providing high-quality user experience. The first two are fairly straightforward. Much of this conference focuses on protecting natural resources in the face of increasing recreational use. The issue of user safety is certainly important, but most user group conflicts are not physical encounters, nor are they actual safety issues. There have been incidents of a horse throwing a rider after being startled by a mountain biker, or a hiker spraining an ankle as they lurch off a trail, but these are few. Actual collisions are very rare.

**B. Users seek quality experiences.**

Most conflicts between users fall into the category of ‘providing a high-quality user experience.’ This is the rather vague realm of personal fulfillment. If I am pedaling slowly and painfully up a steep hill, I am annoyed when a dirt bike whizzes past me. The primary effect is psychological. My effort has been invalidated by someone moving faster than me. A hiker feels the same way when I tool past them on my bicycle. My experience is different than theirs, not better or worse, just different. In that difference lies the basics of user group conflicts.

**C. Early responses to mountain bicycles were diverse.**

When mountain bikes appeared on trails in the early 80s, the first response by agencies was to either ignore them or ban them. Numerous early trail closures were based almost solely on complaints from hikers. Ten years ago, the experience of hikers was sacred enough to justify banning bicycles. Over the years, mountain bikers have organized, become more responsible, developed a code of behavior and built partnerships with land managers and agencies. Today, land managers restrict bicycles and other trail use based on environmental impacts or public safety, but seldom simply on the basis of preserving the experience on one user group. Efforts by mountain bicyclists to reduce conflicts have been helped immensely by the simple reality that mountain bikes are now expected on trails. Other users have adapted to our presence.

**D. Conflict is both perception and reality.**

Conflicts are not only a matter of perception. Frequently real behavior is a fault. Right of way and speed conflicts are serious in the Kettle Moraine State Forest in southern Wisconsin. In the summer of 1992, a researcher hiked for 23 hours and was passed by bikes 346 times. Only 28.6% of the bicyclists gave the hiker notice of their passing (Bjorkman, 1996), even though yielding the trail is one of the generally accepted ‘rules’ for mountain bikers.

**E. Motivations of trail users vary, asymmetrical conflicts result.**

Bjorkman's study also examined the motivations of hikers and mountain bikers, finding that mountain bicyclists are somewhat more interested in physical exercise and hikers are somewhat more interested in nature study. The speed differences between the two user groups can result in an asymmetrical conflict relationship. In the popular Rattlesnake National Recreation Area near Missoula, Montana, about one-third of bicyclists felt there were too many hikers, while nearly two-thirds of hikers thought there were too many bicyclists (Daigle, Watson and Williams, 1991).

**F. Overall experiences of hikers and mountain bikers are analyzed.**

Despite such difficulties, both the Kettle Moraine and Rattlesnake studies found that hikers and bicyclists can generally get along. The Kettle Moraine study concluded that "... trail users are having a satisfactory trail experience. Most encounters between hikers and bikers are uneventful and outwardly tolerant if not cordial." The Rattlesnake study found that "only 20 percent of the hikers could specify bicyclist behavior that interfered with their enjoyment ...". The mountain bike riders and hikers ... have more in common than the hikers realize. The bicyclists seem to be more aware of the similarities ... ."

**G. Most user conflicts are a problem of volume.**

In areas with low numbers of trail users, a wide variety of user types can co-exist with minimal interaction and few problems. With growing numbers of recreationists on public lands and increasing reluctance to build new trails, the obligation to share trails is growing. Each user group has a tendency to defend their right to their chosen mode, and in that defense, can lose sight of the obligation to get along with others.



## **V. SUGGESTIONS AND STRATEGIES**

### **A. Involve the users.**

Jefferson County, Colorado lies on the western edge of the Denver metropolitan area. Jeffco Open Space Parks encompass over 24,000 acres, with 150 miles of trail. In 1997, over 1.5 million people visited Open Space Parks. The trails offer some of the most accessible and popular mountain biking in the Denver area.

In 1995, Jeffco staff proposed closing two parks to mountain bicycling and closing an additional park each year on a rotating basis. The proposal was developed without public input except some complaints from hikers.

When Jeffco held a public hearing on the issue in September 1995, over 400 people showed up. Over half were mountain bikers. Most of the comments, including many from non-cyclists, opposed park closures. Following the meeting, Jeffco tabled the proposal and instead established a task force to develop a new trails management plan. The task force was comprised of Jeffco staff, Open Space Advisory committee members and representatives of the mountain bicycling, hiking and equestrian communities. The task force created a plan which keeps all parks open to all non-motorized trail users while limiting some trails to specific uses. The plan was approved in April 1996.

Implementation has included the creation of excellent video on sharing trails, new trail signs to guide proper use, the rejuvenation of the park host program and a research program to survey trail users, monitor resource conditions and analyze and document the results. Task force member Bob Moore says "Jeffco staff and commissioners deserve a tremendous amount of credit for listening to all of their users. They could have easily done what numerous other agencies have done, just listened to those who complained and shut down the trails." Moore credits the

success of the task force with the county's support of the process. "At least one country commissioner was involved on a regular basis, they provided excellent administrative support, they were consistent in meetings, they provided good communication, they sure as heck listened to the task force members, and they responded overwhelmingly to the recommendations we made."

A recent survey of 202,000 Jeffco residents indicated a 90 percent satisfaction rate with the county's parks and trails systems. In 1996, Jefferson County was named Trail Town USA by the American Hiking Society. The task force continues to meet to address trail issues.

**B. Encourage interaction between user groups:**

Durango area trail users team up every year for a "Trail Sharing Triathalon." Each team includes a horseback rider, a mountain biker and a runner. The winners are not those who complete the course the fastest, but rather the team that best predicted their total team time. Fifty teams participated in the 1997 event which has promoted a culture of trail-sharing, according to Ed Zink of Trails 2000. The Trail Sharing Triathalon is a joint project of San Juan Forest Association, the local BLM office, San Juan National Forest and Trails 2000.

**C. Encourage volunteer work days:**

Most areas struggling with mountain bike issues have a ready force of concerned mountain bikers who can help. Trail work days are an excellent tool to bring mountain bikers, other user groups and land managers together on common issues. These activities build trails; they also build relationships. Colorado groups such as Colorado Plateau Mountain Bike Association, Trail Conservation Service, Summit Fat Tire Society and the Boulder Off-road Alliance have organized numerous trail work days.

**D. Consider a mountain bike patrol:**

There are approximately 45 mountain bike patrols across the country, ranging from a few people to over 100. The primary functions of these volunteer groups are to assist and educate, give directions, and be a friendly, responsible presence. They serve as eyes and ears for the land managers. The National Mountain Bike Patrol, coordinated by International Mountain Bicycling Association, is an umbrella for these local efforts.

**E. Build good trail systems.**

Well designed trail systems minimize environmental impacts, increase user safety and improve everyone's experiences. Proper trail placement, alignment and surface can all minimize user group conflicts.

Multiple use trails are usually the best choice to accommodate the needs of diverse trail users. Single use or restricted trails tend to concentrate users; an open system will disperse users more effectively. Single use trail systems breed parallel routes which tend to increase both environmental and social impacts. Shared trail systems are more easily managed and more cost effective for agencies. Separate trails may make sense in a few cases, such as separate feeder routes from crowded trailheads into a large trail system.

**F. Two sets of suggestions may be helpful.**

The following listing of options for managing trail user conflicts was developed by Andy Kulla of the Lolo National Forest in Montana. Kulla's basic premise is that less restrictive options should be explored first. They are listed from most preferable to least preferable.

1. Signing
2. Peer pressure

3. Education
4. Use closed roads
5. Soft cycling training programs
6. Trail design
7. Barriers to control speed
8. Requested walking zone
9. One-way only
10. Post speed limits
11. Patrols by peers
12. Patrols by rangers
13. Ban during certain times
14. Ban on certain days
15. Construct separate routes
16. Close certain areas and encourage use elsewhere
17. Close trail.

The conclusion of the "Conflicts on Multiple-Use Trails: Synthesis of the Literature and State of the Practice" offers 12 principles for managing conflict on multiple use trails:

1. Recognize conflict as goal interference
2. Provide adequate trail opportunities
3. Minimize number of contacts in problem areas
4. Involve users as early as possible
5. Understand user needs
6. Identify actual sources of conflict
7. Work with affected users
8. Promote trail etiquette
9. Encourage positive interaction among different users
10. Favor 'light-handed management'
11. Plan and act locally
12. Monitor progress.

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